

In Search of the Peach Blossom SpringBy Jonah Dunch

In the summer of 2019, I travelled to the Miho Museum in Shiga, Japan, the headquarters and treasure house of Shumeikai, one of the many new religions that's cropped up in the country in the postwar period, like so many rice paddies or anime love triangles. Shumeikai has chosen to base itself not in the centre of Kyoto, where one might think it would be better placed to attract new adherents, but in the mountains on the city's outskirts. To enter the complex, one must first walk over a suspension bridge strung between two peaks, then through a tunnel carved into the mountain. The mountain tunnel entrance is more than empty pomp: it is an homage to *The Peach Blossom Spring*, a celebrated prose-poem by the Tang-dynasty poet Tao Qian, which tells of a fisherman who ventures through such a tunnel, found at the source of a spring lined by peach trees in bloom, and discovers an idyllic farming village. The villagers' ancestors, he learns, hid behind the peach blossom spring to escape the turmoil of the brutal and short-lived Qin dynasty of hundreds of years past. The villagers sigh sadly as the fisherman tells of the vicissitudes of the succeeding dynasties, and as he leaves, they urge him to tell no one of what he's seen. He promptly ignores their request; when he attempts to lead a lackey of the local magistrate to the peach blossom spring, however, the path there is now impossible to find. In Tao's work, the quiet peace and freedom of ancient times is something one can only stumble upon, just once, quite by accident, not something that an individual or a state can relocate or recreate. It would seem that Shumeikai, which proffers salvation through aesthetic cultivation, holds out hope that one might transmit the vitality of the human past to the present through architectural allusions and assorted artifacts: within the museum's main hall one finds artworks spanning ancient Greece and Egypt in the west to China and Japan in the east, in a pan-Eurasian celebration of high culture.

Japan was the first stop on a seven-month trip abroad that served as my "intercultural experience" for the Certificate in International Learning. (I was there to take a course in Kyoto on modern Japanese

art and architecture, in partial fulfillment of the CIL course credit requirement.) Next came Beijing, where I attended the Chinese Philosophy Summer School at Beijing Normal University. There, too, actors with interests tied to our own time attempted to lay claim to history. One professor argued that “Confucianism is Chinese liberalism,” pointing to alleged textual support in the Confucian classic the *Mencius* for a multi-state cooperative system akin to the European Union—a system quite different from the centralized bureaucracy of Imperial China or, indeed, the modern People’s Republic. Yet the present regime has reclaimed Confucius as patron saint in recent years; on our group trip to Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius, a state representative proclaimed that “thanks to Confucius, China has always been a peaceful and prosperous nation, with no aggression or expansion.” As much as these parties are at odds politically, when they look to the Confucian legacy, both do more than merely report what they find—they translate it, repurpose it to their own ideological ends. But this approach to tradition is not unique to us late moderns; Tao Qian invokes a time-frozen village to condemn his milieu by way of contrast, while Confucius himself, *Analects* 7:1 tells us, professed merely to “transmit” the seven-century-old tradition of the founders of the waning Zhou dynasty, as he strove to reform the corrupt regimes of his own benighted age.

As is most grossly obvious in the case of the PRC official, such appeals to history can lend one’s agenda an aura of gravity and normative authority it may well lack on its own merits. (My experiences in the CIL have sharpened my critical awareness of this rhetorical strategy.) Yet I am reluctant to ascribe this sort of cynical, propagandistic motive to every thinker or reformer who dresses their latter-day projects in the garments of the past—not only out of the principle of charity, but also because this motive cannot be plausibly ascribed to those who know full well that their audience or interlocutors have no love of their forbears. Indeed, the vapid, grasping rulers of Confucius’s time had no wish to emulate the sage-kings of old; the old master defended the Zhou tradition, it seems, not to earn the confidence of history buffs, but out of a sincere faith in the dynasty’s time-honoured wisdom,

which in his view combined the best of what came before it. “The Zhou gazes down upon the two dynasties that preceded it. How brilliant in culture it is!” he remarks in *Analects* 3:14, “I follow the Zhou.” (By exposing me to cases of evident sincerity like this one, the CIL has trained me also to read faithfully when faith is called for.) Confucius, though, elaborates on the Zhou tradition in the process of transmission, providing, for example, a novel rationale for its ritual protocols, treating them as means of ethical cultivation, not mere propitiations of gods and ghosts. Yet the core of tradition, even as it is reshaped, remains indispensable—throughout the *Mencius*, the titular later follower of Confucius verbally spars with a cast of irresponsible rulers and misguided dialecticians, all of whom make the common error of dismissing the past, the wisdom of the ancients and their ways. The Confucian insight here, as I understand it (with, appropriately, some elaboration), is that we must look to history and its cultural products to find the rich material needed to craft novel and compelling ideas and artworks—for no one human mind, nor even any given group of contemporaries, is sharp and imaginative enough on its own to conjure this kind of vital matter into being *ex nihilo*.

I don’t know if I would have appreciated this insight prior to going through the CIL program, since I entered university with a share of the aversion to tradition popular in our milieu and common to the young. But the courses I took to complete the CIL impressed upon me how thinkers and artists can value and respect tradition without succumbing to credulous devotion—far from it. In “Women, Gender, and Sexuality in the Ancient World,” I learned of how the Greeks and Romans repurposed their religious stories and practices to comment on the gender norms of their societies and at times to test their limits. A theatre history class introduced me to the Martinican author Aimé Césaire, whose postcolonial adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (itself the work of a master scavenger of history) depicts the dispossession and alienation of Afro-Caribbean slaves. And as much as Plato badmouthed the poets, I found in a seminar on his work that he delighted in using myth and allegory to present his thinking. In each case, I encountered authors drawing on the heritage of human cultures—whether

local to them, as for Plato, or foreign, as for Césaire—to create inventive and subversive cultural products. That said, this recycler’s approach to tradition, I have also come to appreciate, is not without its potential quandaries. In my Intercultural Communication Training, we discussed different views on how one ought to engage with foreign cultures, including cultural relativism, the view that one ought not to privilege one set of cultural values over others. The putative promise of living as a cultural relativist, I learned, is that one will be better able to appreciate different cultures and cooperate with their members. Yet as we discussed that weekend, a challenge facing the cultural relativist is that, if they are to retain values of their own, they must somehow affirm their commitment to these values within a relativist framework. But cultural values and the traditions that sustain them, I would argue, demand commitment of a firmly anti-relativist sort; they call for us to adhere to them exclusively, to take them as our own. (Confucius, of course, heeded a call of this kind from the tradition of the Zhou.) Many would-be cultural recyclers face a similar challenge: they must cultivate a deep respect and concern for cultural traditions to which they are not committed, at least not in the same totalizing way as were those traditions’ originators and transmitters. (Beyond its mountain tunnel Shumeikai has erected a museum, after all, not an agrarian settlement emulating ancient peasantry.)

The CIL program, quite rightly, has not supplied me with a clearcut how-to guide for facing this challenge, or others that might emerge in the work of intercultural dialogue and comparative study. But it has trained me to be alive to such challenges, and to reflect upon such issues as the role of tradition in the cultural life of the present and the contemporary student’s relationship thereto. Moreover, the CIL has equipped me to appreciate human ingenuity in even the most quotidian of cultural artifacts. When I studied German to fulfill the CIL’s language requirement, for example, I delighted in the word *Handschuhe*, “gloves,” or literally “hand shoes.” These days I am studying Mandarin in Taipei; recently a bartender, sensing rightly just how *freaking cool* I would find it, taught me a similarly clever and creative compound word: 天分 *tiānfèn*, “talent.” 天 *tiān* on its own means

“sky” or “Heaven” (which in Chinese tradition was the supreme being) and 分 *fēn* means “piece,” ergo a talent is a “piece of Heaven.” I finish the CIL all too aware that no true shortcuts lie on the way to deeply understanding human cultural traditions. In search of the peach blossom spring, no one can avoid trekking through the mountains. But I complete the program, and my degree as a whole, itching to scour the terrain of human language, history, and culture for pieces of heaven made manifest.

Works Consulted

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